

## Saying goodbye

'They're here!' Alys said disdainfully. As part of her training she had been tasked with inputting patient notes while the others had been fussing around getting themselves ready for the visit. She was sat at the computer at the nurses' station and swung round the CCTV monitor that recorded the lift area and doors so that Sister Pritchard and her huddle of staff could watch; she continued with her task, fingers clicking rapidly over the keyboard.

'That's enough, Alys!' Sister Pritchard hissed. 'We don't want that racket when she comes in. Show some courtesy, some respect.'

Alys raised one eyebrow but complied with the order. She missed working with the younger staff on the wards of her previous training rotations. Somehow this geriatric ward had ended up almost exclusively staffed with much older women who had returned to nursing after raising their families. It was probably all down to the recent election promises and the new Tory government inducements to attract back experienced NHS staff.

The older nurses remembered the actress' films. They peered eagerly over each other's shoulders to catch their first glimpse of Amelia Forrester. At the centre of a large group, the actress was instantly recognisable: tall, ethereal, luxuriant white-blonde hair cascading over the shoulders of her deepest-black jacket.

Amelia left her PA, makeup artist, hairdresser and others of her entourage outside. Only Cecil, her photographer, and Leon, her manager, accompanied her through the double doors onto the ward. Her stilettos clacked noisily as she advanced, hand forward, to greet the ward sister.

'Ms Forrester,' Sister Pritchard said, only just stopping herself from curtsying, 'it's an honour to have you visit our hospital, and we're all so very sorry it is in such

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sad circumstances.'

Alys slipped out from behind the desk. 'Excuse me, Ms Forrester, but we insist on all visitors to the ward using hand sanitiser when they come in.' She held forward the bottle and Amelia, startled, meekly held out her hand for a squirt of the gel, as did Cecil and Leon. Alys then held it towards Sister Pritchard. 'You shook hands,' she reminded her boss, devilment dancing in her eyes, and received a glare in return that promised trouble was coming her way later.

Sister Pritchard turned back to the actress, rapidly adjusting her expression to one of sympathy as she saw Amelia daintily wipe away a tear with a delicate, lace-edged handkerchief. With a gentle hand behind Amelia's back she guided her towards the private room.

'You're very kind, Sister.' She paused at the threshold, her famous sapphire blue eyes brimming. 'But I'd like to go in alone.'

'Of course, I quite understand,' she said, and stood back, holding the door ajar for Amelia. She was letting it swing shut when one of the two men, who had not been introduced when they came onto the ward with Amelia, said, 'Excuse me, Ma'am,' and followed Amelia in, quickly followed by the camera-wielding photographer. She turned and half raised her arms, palms out, in an exaggerated shrug to her staff. 'What the...?' she whispered to them. 'How's that "alone"?'

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Leon whispered in Amelia's ear as they entered, 'Don't forget: right side of the bed, hold one hand, linger over the kiss on the forehead for Cecil to ensure perfect lighting.'

They nearly collided when Amelia halted abruptly, the way blocked by a frumpy, overweight woman who was standing just inside the doorway.

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‘Eleanor.’ Amelia’s voice was icy as she acknowledged her sister.

Elly flinched, as though struck: Amelia had always been a good mimic of their mother’s voice, especially those millions of times when her mother was reprimanding her for some imagined slight or misdemeanour. Throughout their childhood Amelia had used that voice to tease and goad her. She couldn’t recall their mother ever speaking to Amelia that way.

‘You two – out!’ Elly stabbed the air, an expression of absolute fury directed at the two men; much to their surprise they found they had obeyed her instantly and the door closed again between them and their employer. She glared at her sister.

‘I was right then,’ she said, shaking her head slowly. ‘I thought you’d bring the circus with you.’ She went over to the window, turning her back on her sister. ‘And the really sad thing is you don’t even realise just how despicable you are, trying to get a photo opportunity even from our mother’s death.’

The vulnerable look Amelia kept for her public had disappeared the moment she entered the room. ‘It was to be just one photo, Elly, for our personal records,’ she said coldly.

‘Oh dear,’ Elly mocked, turning back. ‘An *occasion* in your life that won’t be documented to the last detail. Own up, I’ve stolen your headline: “Amelia Forrester rushes to sick mother’s bedside” hmmm?’

“Now it’s *deathbed* rather than *bedside*. How could you, Elly? What you’ve stolen is my chance to say goodbye to Mummy.” Tears trickled down her flawless cheeks.

‘Oh, come on, Amelia,’ Elly snorted, ‘don’t try that with me. I know how well you cry to order, right from when we were kids.’

‘And didn’t it serve me well!’ Amelia couldn’t help but gloat. ‘But you were

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supposed to inform me when she got near the end.'

Elly raised one mocking eyebrow. 'And I did. And here you are.'

'You told me when I was thousands of miles away and Mummy was... was... Oh!'

'Didn't want to drag you from your busy life unnecessarily.' Elly went back to her seat by the bed, her spine curving in a despondent arch as she tiredly rested her elbows on her knees and rubbed her hands over her face. She knew she could verbally run rings around her sister, and their mother could no longer constantly take Amelia's side, but suddenly it all seemed so utterly pointless. She glanced up. 'Do you intend actually looking at Mum while you're here?' she asked.

Amelia turned ashen, her eyes darting across the walls, the floor. 'I daren't.' She retreated to the window and gripped the ledge. 'You know I'm no good with sick people and... and...' She licked her lips nervously, head drooping, arms tight to her side as though trying to become smaller, to disappear from the room.

'I'm not asking you to touch her, even though she's still warm. Just look at her. How were you going to get that photo if you won't even look at her?'

Amelia laughed a rather grim little laugh. 'I'm more frightened of Leon than I am of...' She shuddered.

'Bodies... cadavers... mortal remains...' Elly filled in for her. 'All good terms, take your pick.' Silence stretched between them. 'No doubt you've arranged a press conference; what will you say?'

Amelia drew herself up ramrod straight again, refusing to admit that she only rated a few freelance hacks these days. 'Speaking of which,' she said, brushing imaginary dust off her hands, 'my staff are very good but they've got their work cut out doing a makeover on you beforehand.' She grimaced a little, looking at Elly's

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crumpled and rather grubby tee and jeans. 'You've really let yourself go.'

'Publicity is your thing, not mine.' She glanced down and idly scratched at a food stain on her thigh. 'And if I look rather the worse for wear, just remember that I've been sole carer for Mum since I was fifteen and you fled to LA: I don't nurse in designer gear. And as for the last dozen weeks here...'

Amelia sniffed. 'You could at least have made some kind of effort.'

'As could you!' Elly fired back at her, launching out of her chair and stabbing her stiff forefinger into Amelia's chest. 'Time after time you flew fifty-five hundred miles LA to London and not once did you manage the extra hundred and fifty to come see her in Rotherham.' To her own disgust tears threatened and her voice caught as she tried to finish. 'Mum collected every scrap of information about you, and every trip of yours to London she'd ask me if you were going to pop in for a cuppa and a chat, and every time she'd invent all sorts of excuses for you, why you couldn't possibly travel "so far" to see her.' She angrily swiped the tears away with the back of her hand. 'Every time broke her heart a little more. Well you can't have a cuppa or a chat with her now, you can't say thank you for all the sacrifices she made for you, but you can at least look at her and say goodbye.'

'Don't leave me!' Amelia begged as Elly headed for the door, but was ignored.

Leon popped his head round. 'OK now?'

Amelia drew in a deep breath. 'Let's get this done and get out of here.'

'Uh-uh... ward rounds next for a bit of glad-handing and publicity photos, then hospital radio. Can't miss an opportunity like this.'

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. 'OK.' Her voice was shaky.

'Remind me: which side of the bed?'

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The nurses had a coffee break while they listened to the hospital radio interview with Amelia Forrester. Alys selected another chocolate biscuit and surveyed the group. Most of them were closer to Alys' mother's age than her own. There were comments along the lines of 'oh yes, do you remember the bit when...' and 'I really thought she'd marry Simon Barton after that film, they looked so good together.'

'She's old news,' Alys said dismissively, 'hasn't been in a decent film for donkeys' years – or should that be 'never been in a decent film'? My Mum watched her films when I was a toddler; people want different things now.'

'Oh, that's not true!' Sister Pritchard exclaimed. 'Her films can still make me cry.'

Alys snorted biscuit crumbs. 'Cry? From laughter maybe, they're hilarious they're so bad. Let's face it, she only got parts because she was young and photogenic. After that facelift a decade ago she got some B movie parts but it's obvious she's middle-aged. I don't expect she'll be around at all much longer.'

'But there are plenty of older actresses making films and TV series.'

'Yes, but *they* can act; Amelia Forrester never could.'

As Amelia had never even been nominated for any awards, and they couldn't bring to mind any recent films, they couldn't really dispute Alys' claims.

'You all complain about social media and the celebrity culture now,' she continued, 'but apart from the technology, do you really believe things were any different back then?'

The debate quickly fizzled out. There was a general feeling of sadness – and some resentment towards Alys – as they contemplated the emptiness of Hollywood glamour, the illusions they all fell for.

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Late that afternoon the visitors emerged into the hospital car park. Amelia gave her PA instructions to have her car collect her from her mother's house at 8pm and to ensure they had a table booked in their hotel for 8:30pm. 'And I don't trust British cooking: check the chef knows how to make a proper Caesar salad and tell him no extra oil on my grilled chicken.' It was getting harder and harder to maintain her slender figure.

She walked over to join Elly. 'That's yours?' Amelia was surprised: she'd expected an old rust-bucket of a car, not the nearly new Ford Focus Elly had unlocked.

'Motability scheme pays for it, so that I could get Mum out and about.' She sighed with the realisation that was one more problem looming for her. 'I suppose it will have to go back now; I'd better pick up a bus timetable. And I'll lose my carer's allowance too, so it's shitty job here I come, since thanks to you and Mum I have no qualifications and no experience.'

Amelia clicked the seatbelt in. 'You always did like buses.'

'Really? I don't know what planet you and Mum lived on but it sure as hell wasn't the same one as the rest of us.' She carefully reversed out of the parking bay and headed for the exit. 'I used the bus because Mum was always too busy ferrying *you* around to your dance classes and your elocution lessons and the hairdresser and god knows where else to leave any time to take me anywhere.' She expertly slotted into the busy A-road traffic and drew up at red lights at the crossroads. She looked round at her sister. 'Then, of course, you finally passed your driving test at the *third* attempt after – I forget, how many lessons was it? – so the car became yours and it was *you* who couldn't spare five minutes to give me a lift anywhere. Not

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even to go and get the weekly shop when Mum became too ill to see to any of the household stuff.'

'Well of course I needed the car! Of course I was busy! My *career* was just taking off.'

'And take off is exactly what you did, never mind my exams were coming up. Took off all the way to America.' Elly's jaw clenched at the memory of those times, of the excitement and pride she had felt when her teachers were convinced she was heading high academically, followed by the devastating news that she had no choice, that she was stuck exactly where she was for years, maybe decades, to come. Her life was over before it had even begun.

The lights changed and she ground into first gear before pulling away. Elly tried to call on her mindfulness training to calm down.

Amelia looked around critically at the preponderance of charity shops, pubs, bookmakers and low-end stores. 'Still a dump round here, then.'

Elly bristled at the criticism. 'It's been a struggle for many people with the decline of the main industries. But these are good, honest folk and we get by as best we can. It's still preferable to the fantasy world of Hollywood.' They crawled along a bit further in the rush hour traffic among the downtown workers heading back to suburbs like this, eager for their homes and families. 'Anyway, even if it is a "dump", it's one I could have got us out of if I'd ever had the chance of a career. And it would have been a good career with an Oxford degree under my belt.'

'Come off it! Mum could never have afforded to send you to that poncey college you wanted to go to.'

'We'd have managed if I won a scholarship, which my teachers were positive I would. Or if you cared enough for your sister to ever think of helping out financially.'



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Elly glanced across at Amelia; she was casually inspecting her flawless – and no doubt fake – nails. ‘Own up: how much did you earn while I should have been studying for my A-levels?’

‘Mum must have told you how often I offered to help if I had any cash spare.’ Amelia put her hand on Elly’s arm but was flicked off like a fly.

‘Don’t touch me when I’m driving;’ Elly’s voice was biting, ‘it’s distracting.’ She pulled up at yet another set of lights that were against them. ‘I know we never saw any help actually coming our way. Ever.’

Amelia slumped back in her seat. ‘You have no idea how expensive it was for me back then. If I was to land the big parts I had to live in the right area, be seen in the right places, wearing the right clothes, dining in the best restaurants where the people who mattered would see me and remember me.’ She tossed her hair back over her shoulder. ‘And since then I’ve had to maintain that lifestyle.’

‘You’ve done that all right. Not a very positive outcome from it, though.’

Rain started falling as Elly turned off the High Street towards their estate of Victorian houses, built during the height of the Industrial Revolution when coal mines and ironworks brought wealth and a rapidly increasing population to the ancient Yorkshire minster town. The drizzle quickly became a torrent and the louring clouds matched her dark mood.

‘You don’t understand, Elly. I’d never land another part if I was seen to be dropping my standards. I don’t like it any more than you do, but it’s all about appearances.’

‘No, you were never one to abide by the Micawber Principle,’ she said drily.

‘What?’

‘Or to even know what it is. Or to know when you’re heading towards Skid

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Row.'

Amelia shuddered; she'd got lost once and ended up driving through that neighbourhood. For all the colour the local artistic community was bringing to the area, the sight of the huge population of vagrants was vivid in her mind. Regular nightmares involving poverty plagued her and disturbed every waking hour too.

Elly enjoyed her discomfiture but didn't comment. She navigated through streets that became wider as they left a run-down commercial district behind. The houses here had driveways so nose to tail parking at the roadside was replaced by graceful trees either side of the avenues they passed through. She eventually drove between shoulder height brick pillars, the open wrought iron gates in sad need of a lick of paint. She pulled up to the side of their house and engaged the handbrake, got out of the car and headed for the front door.

Amelia followed her into their childhood home, lingering as she shut the front door and the memories flooded back. She remembered how, on sunny days, the stained-glass quarter light of the door sent rainbow colours down across the black and white tiles of the hallway, the diamond pattern edged in a narrow border of columbines. She'd get home from school to the smell of fresh baking and their mother wanting to know every detail of her day. Today she saw just the dust motes dancing in the air and the dullness of the unpolished bannister rail. Everywhere she looked seemed shabby and neglected. And so small and dark; it might be large by British standards but was claustrophobic when compared with her LA home.

The kettle clicked off, the sound bringing her out of her reverie, and she followed Elly into the kitchen at the back of the house. It looked out onto a long garden, now full of weeds and long grass. Their mother had loved her roses, now almost invisible. No doubt the once carefully tended vegetable plot at the end had

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fared no better, judging by the state of the shed which was leaning drunkenly against the back wall, partially blocking the wooden gate which gave access to a back lane.

‘Do you still drink tea or does it have to be coffee these days?’ Elly asked. ‘If so, you’re out of luck.’

‘Just water, thanks.’ Amelia ran a wondering hand over the formica-topped table. ‘Nothing’s changed, not even the appliances. How can you live like this? This kitchen should have been ripped out and refitted decades ago.’

‘My goodness! You *are* capable of seeing something from someone else’s point of view then.’ She poured a glass of water and dumped it on the table. ‘There’s been a lot Mum and I would have liked to change, but “like” and “able” are two very different beasts when money’s tight and one’s time is taken up with a very demanding invalid.’ She slid out a metal-framed, plastic-seated chair and sat at the table with a large mug of builders’ strength tea. ‘First on the list would have been the roof and guttering, then rewiring to modern standards, then the plumbing and heating. But I suppose the new owners will do that.’

Amelia was confused. ‘What new owners?’

‘I’m guessing you’ll want your half of the house’s value now Mum’s dead, eh? So I’ll have to put it on the market.’ She took a slurp of tea. ‘And if you want to talk, sit down: I can’t keep looking up to you.’ She laughed a little to herself at the thought of looking up to Amelia in any sense of the words.

Amelia inspected a chair carefully before sitting gingerly, right on the edge. ‘Actually, Elly, no, you don’t have to do that. I’m happy for it to pass to you.’

Elly was only slightly surprised; after all, Amelia would have no idea how much house values had rocketed since the 1980s. She would probably be thinking that it wouldn’t be worth much in its current state and Elly suspected Amelia wanted

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the leverage for something else she wanted. She had a shrewd idea what that something else was but it suited her to play along. 'I suppose I could try for a mortgage so I could get the work done and take in lodgers for a bit of income.' She could see Amelia's brain working frantically, trying to suss how to get the conversation round to what she wanted. 'Or maybe I'll sell up and *finally* go to university, get a degree and a proper career.'

Amelia smoothed down the fabric of her skirt and said, in her little girl voice that grated so on Elly's ears, 'If you did that, we'd have to dispose of the house contents I suppose.'

'I suppose we would.' Elly paused. Amelia was holding her breath. 'Not that we have anything of any real value here.'

'No,' Amelia agreed quickly. Too quickly. 'I'm sure the furniture could go in an auction, if it's not worm-eaten by now,' she said. 'And I wouldn't expect anything from that either,' she added, 'as that would help a little with your expenses.' She put a hand over her sister's and looked up through her lashes. 'But I would like a few mementoes to take back to LA.'

Elly patted Amelia's hand then sat back to take another sip of tea before responding. 'A few of our mother's personal things, you mean.' She found it quite comical that Amelia should think the ploys she used on men would work on her, but it was progressing just how she wanted so kept a straight face and a sympathetic tone.

'Yes. Just something to remember her by, you know?' Amelia twirled a strand of hair.

'Oh yes, I know exactly what you mean. A few trinkets, perhaps.' Amelia looked startled and Elly found it hard not to laugh out loud. 'Maybe some of that

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costume jewellery you used to love playing with?’

‘Yes! That would be perfect.’ Amelia fiddled with her water glass. ‘Mum and I often got it out together, so that would remind me of many happy hours with her.’

‘Come on then,’ Elly said, standing up and going to the door, ‘it’s all up in her bedroom still.’

They went upstairs together and into the largest bedroom; it looked over the front garden and road, and had a good view of the neighbours’ houses. Their mother had loved keeping an eye on everyone’s activities from behind the nets draped in front of the wide window.

‘I think what annoyed Mum most about being bedridden was that she couldn’t be nosy any more.’ Elly pulled the net curtain to one side and scanned up and down the road. ‘Go on then,’ she said over her shoulder, ‘you know where the jewellery boxes are.’

Amelia reached up to the top shelf of the old mahogany wardrobe and took out the first two of the six large boxes. She dithered, wondering where to sit down with them. ‘What happened to Mum’s bed and dressing table?’

‘I needed the space. We were loaned an NHS motorised air bed and had shelves of medical supplies.’ She turned and leant against the window ledge. ‘Those went back when Mum was admitted to hospital, of course. You’ll have to sit on the floor or take them down to the lounge.’ She went to the wardrobe and put the other boxes on the faded pink and cream carpet. Suddenly tired of the game, the pretence, she said, ‘Look, why mess about? Take the lot, I don’t want them.’

Amelia couldn’t believe her luck. Was it really going to be this easy? ‘Don’t you want to keep any of it?’

Elly snorted. ‘You might have noticed, I’m not really into wearing jewellery...

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costume or otherwise.’ She could hardly hold back the smirk. She had always had the measure of her sister. ‘I’m sure you’d hate to see it just thrown out or going to a charity shop.’

‘I’ll put the boxes in the hall ready for my pick up, then,’ Amelia said faintly, with only a faint blush betraying her.

Elly knew what Amelia would be thinking: that their mother had never told Elly the truth about their father’s real “profession”, and what had happened to him during that last jewellery heist that had gone so horribly wrong. And she’d be right, their mother had never breathed a word about it. Elly had been just four years old when it happened, but little pitchers have big ears.

Amelia had been twelve at the time and their mother’s confidante. They had both thought it would be easy to hide the facts from Elly, to invent a whole other life for their father and have Elly believe it. Ha! As if. She’d always known far more than they ever did.

‘Yes, you do that,’ Elly said nonchalantly. ‘I’ll give you a hand. Then we can sit down and discuss funeral arrangements.’

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The car had arrived as Amelia had ordered. Elly stood in the porchway, waving goodbye to the sister she knew she would never see again, knowing full well that she would come up with some excuse not to attend the funeral service. She’d probably be back in LA within twenty-four hours.

If today had been an audition Amelia would have failed quite dismally, she mused. Or was she being too harsh? After all, she’d known Amelia and her ways and wiles intimately for many years. But Amelia had never seen other people clearly, never thought about anyone but herself and how to get what she wanted. She had

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no more idea now than when they were children about what motivated people, what character and personality were all about., except in so far as they impinged on her own desires. Which was why she couldn't act, Elly thought as she shut the door on the receding taillights and dismal evening.

Her sister was really as much a victim of poor parenting as she had been. Their mother's ambitions for her elder daughter had blinded her to the harm she was doing by not letting Amelia experience the harsh realities of life. She felt sorry for Amelia in a way, thinking she could have been quite a nice person if their mother hadn't given her such a skewed impression of herself. She'd never really grown up and it was probably all too late now.

Would Amelia be clever enough to sell those jewels without getting caught? Maybe, maybe not; she wasn't concerned either way. She just felt enormous relief that the remaining evidence of her father's guilt was finally out of her house. Yes, *her* house. She had previously arranged for the family solicitor, an old family friend after all these years, to pop in that evening and see the sisters together about the will. He had recorded Amelia's instructions before she left, duly witnessed by a neighbour, that the house was to be solely Elly's.

And the beauty of it was that Amelia had left convinced that *she* had pulled a fast one! She'd find out soon enough what a small percentage of her haul was what she thought it was...

Neither Amelia or her mother had known about the "lessons" from her father when he was babysitting her. Before their father was shot dead Elly had never minded about her sister's activities; she had adored him and loved their private hours together. He had been so chuffed when she could accurately separate real and fake diamonds at the age of three, and by the time of his death could name every type of

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stone and give him a valuation estimate, both legitimate and via a fence. Her memory and understanding were sharp then and had remained so. Young as she had been, she could recall the time her mother had retrieved the stolen items from his lock up, and she had eavesdropped every conversation between her mother and sister as they grew up.

‘Well, Mum,’ she said into the evening stillness, ‘you always wanted Amelia to have them all and now she has, real and fake. Did you ever know Dad funded his love of horse racing and the dogs with most of them? Or did you think it was only the mortgage he paid off?’

She looked up and noticed the first stars, shining through gaps between the fast retreating clouds. Raindrops still dripped from the gutters and leaves, glistening when caught in the light from the porch. Everywhere looked and smelled clean and ready for a fresh start in the morning.

She leaned back against the front door and ran her hand down the doorframe. ‘Yes, *my* house. At last.’ She’d get the best price possible by whipping the place into shape before selling it, and then a new life beckoned. Or she could get a degree locally, take in a few fellow students as lodgers, and then maybe a Masters among the dreaming spires of Oxford. Lots of options and whatever she did it would be *her* choice, no one else to consult or compromise for.

Freedom. She’d waited a long time for it and had no intention of any family ties shackling her ever again. Goodbye to the old life, and hello to the new, whatever it might bring.